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ABSTRACT

Cooperative efforts between Cornell University and the community to improve school education are discussed. A committee was formed with representation from the university and three area school districts. Questionnaires distributed to teachers and administrators in area schools determined that there was a need for increased inservice education, as well as support in the form of lectures, surplus equipment and supplies, and access to Cornell facilities. Almost 200 faculty responded in some way to a solicitation, and a roster of potential lecturers, resource persons, and facilities available was compiled. To meet teachers' need for greater access to the intellectual resources of the university, two new programs were instituted: a scholarship program enabling teachers to enroll in university courses at no cost, with or without credit; and a visiting fellow program, which allows teachers to pursue continued scholarship. A free workshop for math teachers consisting of six 2-hour meetings was provided by the university in spring 1985. Additional workshops and special programs for school administrators have also been offered. Continuing needs include obtaining financial support for workshop programs, scheduling professional development programs, and locating the program in the university's administrative structure. (SW)

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THE CORNELL COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND THE COMMUNITY*

Joseph D. Novak and David Monk

Origins of the Committee

During the spring of 1983, there was a growing national concern about the quality of education in general and public schools in particular. The publication of several national reports and the wide publicity they received in newspapers, television and other media led to a growing public interest and concern in what appeared to be the deteriorating quality of school education. Some informal meetings were held on the Cornell campus by faculty, community members, and others interested in school education to discuss what might be done in our area. The question arose constantly as to whether or not Cornell University could contribute more to resolution of some of the problems that appeared to exist in education. A series of informal meetings attracting fifteen to fifty people were held, mostly on the Cornell campus, and almost all of these meetings received publicity in the local media. The extent of interest both on campus and off campus indicated a need for the University to respond formally to the concerns expressed. There was also interest shown by a private foundation to offer some support for a University effort to address the problem of the quality of school education.

The Provost of the Universtiy called a meeting of senior professors to discuss the issue of how Cornell might respond to the expressed concerns and the consensus emerged rapidly that a committee should be formed comprised of both University members and members from area schools. Professor Roald

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Hoffmann, 1981 Nobel Laureate in Chemistry, was invited to chair the Committee since he had already been active in some of the community meetings. Under his leadership, an eighteen-member committee was formed with representation from three area school districts including one representative from teachers and one from the administration in each district. A grant was received to enable the Committee to employ a full-time Coordinator and a part-time secretary. Formal activities sponsored by the Committee began in late summer, 1983.

First Efforts

We had observed in the earlier meetings that there was considerable skepticism and distrust expressed between both school and community participants and Cornell faculty regarding the relationship between the University and the community. In a small town such as Ithaca, the Universtiy presents an imposing structure, and on occasions there are expressions of concern that the University inordinately influences activities in the schools and in the community. There is also the continuing concern that the University's interest is only temporary and will fade away before any real lasting effects can be achieved. It was clear that the first objective of the Committee was to build trust and confidence on all sides and to look toward programs that could be sustained on a long term basis.

Questionnaires were distributed to teachers and administrators in area schools to obtain their suggestions on how they would like to be served by the newly formed Committee. There was a fair consensus among the respondents, with the teachers expressing most commonly the need for increased in-service educational opportunities, as well as support in the form of lectures, surplus equipment and supplies and access to Cornell facilities. The latter two

items were relatively easy to respond to, and the Committee proceeded to solicit faculty and departments regarding availability of surplus materials and individual interest in lecturing, guiding field trips, or serving as mentors in their subject areas. Almost two hundred faculty responded in some way to a solicitation and a substantial roster of potential lecturers, resource persons and facilities available was compiled. Copies of these lists were distributed to area schools with encouragement to seek out opportunities for exploiting the resources at Cornell University. The Coordinator served as an individual to receive and monitor requests and to indentify appropriate individuals or facilities when specific requests did not clearly match items on available lists.

Another element in our program was to organize an Education Day to which area schools were invited to bring both faculty and students. A group of distinguished professors made presentations in a two-hour program in a campus auditorium. Some twelve hundred students and faculty came to the campus for Education Day and many were pleased to hear from speakers such as Carl Sagan. However, there was also considerable criticism of Education Day as being more show than substance. It was decided that the long-term needs of the community would be better served by less charismatic efforts and efforts that could be continued on a sustained basis.

Some of the problems brought to our attention in early meetings with school and community people was the inaccessibility of library resources and other campus facilities. However, some of this concern was due to lack of information, since several libraries on campus are open to the community and permit them to loan books or other materials without restriction. Parking restrictions also could be circumvented by using peripheral parking lots or by special permit arrangements. Access to courses was enhanced by providing

all schools with copies of complete catalogues and other Cornell University bulletins. For every request expressed to the Committee, some action was taken either to meet the request or to show ways in which the interest might be met through existing programs and facilities.

Professor Hoffmann went on sabbatical leave in January 1984, and there was a need for some reorganization of the Committee, including the employment of a new Coordinator that would work more closely with the Committee to implement in a low-key fashion projects and programs recommended by the Committee. This reorganization was completed by March and the normal work of the Committee resumed on full scale.

Emerging Patterns

In order to meet the keenly expressed need on the part of teachers for greater access to the intellectual resources of Cornell University, two new programs were instituted. A scholarship program was established whereby teachers were invited to apply to enroll in almost any course offered on campus. The course would be available to the teacher at no cost, with or without credit. Of course, most teachers have difficulty in meeting class schedules, and relatively few courses at Cornell University are available in late afternoon or evenings. Nevertheless, essentially the entire catalogue of courses was available to teachers through this arrangement if they could find some means for attending classes.

Another program that was established was the Visiting Fellow program which was simply an extension of the long-standing program in place for visiting scholars from other universities or research laboratories. What we did was to inform teachers that they could apply for appointment as visiting fellows to any department relevant to their field of work. This appointment permitted them to obtain library privileges, access to a full range of Cornell

activities and programs and personal association with faculty in a specific department. A number of teachers have taken advantage of this program to pursue continued scholarship. We expect this program to continue and increase in popularity to the point where a significant percentage of area teachers will take advantage of it in the future.

As noted earlier, there was a strong interest in in-service teacher education programs, including various kinds of workshop programs. The Committee participated in planning or supporting workshops for teachers in the area, but most of these were half-day or one-day programs. Clearly a teacher who is deficient in some area of mathematics, science or foreign language cannot gain these competencies in one or two-day workshops. Unfortunately, the establishment of longer workshop programs usually requires special funding, and in the case of summer programs, it is usually necessary to pay a stipend to the teacher as well since most teachers augment their salaries through summer work. A workshop for math teachers consisting of six two-hour meetings was provided by Cornell University in the spring of 1985, with the cost of staffing this program born by Cornell University. We do not anticipate that large numbers of teachers can be served this way in the future, although it should be possible to offer at least one such workshop program each year.

Some of the area teachers have taken advantage of the scholarship or visiting fellow programs and are building close ties between their school departments and departments at the University. The most conspicuous results of these programs have been the growing confidence in school people that Cornell does care about their needs and that the doors are wide open for participation. The greatest limitation to expanded cooperative effort are the difficult time schedules of both school personnel and University personnel.

These problems are inherent in the system and no easy solutions are evident.

During 1984-85, some of the workshops were designed to present new ideas to teachers either in subject matter or in pedagogical stategies. These workshops grew out of activities pursued by Cornell faculty members and represent one approach to the infusion of new ideas into the system. Although our primary work has been in response to interests and concerns expressed by school personnel, it is also been our feeling that we should be proactive whenever possible and try out new ideas in cooperation with area schools.

Another program that goes beyond the more obvious ways in which Cornell could work with area schools has been special programs for school administrators dealing with the frontiers of thinking in various fields. These are informal seminars or tours (such as a tour of The Johnson Museum on the Cornell campus) designed less to present specific information than to illustrate the kind of thinking and commitments that engage scholars on campus and that can provide windows into new intellectual frontiers. These programs appear to be enthusiastically received by school administrators.

Continuing Needs

The most pressing continuing need is to obtain financial support for workshop programs of an extended nature. As the teaching corps in schools continues to age, there is increasingly the problem of updating teachers in their subject matter field and in new pedagogical strategies. Although most teachers say they want primarily the former and little of the latter, it is our observation that new theory-based pedagogical strategies can very much benefit school programs and future effectiveness. Most of these strategies, such as concept mapping, require a continuing assocation between teachers and innovators for their effective implementation. Of course, instruction in new subject matter knowledge should be not only a part of the instruction

included in demonstrating pedagogical strategies but must be the primary commitment of most workshop programs.

We have not yet found solutions to some of the structural limitations in school programs, such as the fact that it is exceedingly difficult for teachers to take time out for professional development between 8:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. The tight administrative strictures for both teachers and students preclude full utilization of community and University resources. These problems are exacerbated by tight school budgets which are not likely to become more flexible in the future. What seems to be needed is some structural changes in school organizational patterns, but none are on the horizon at this time.

We must continue to seek funding for workshop programs, and we anticipate that most of this must come from state or federal sources. Unfortunately, in spite of the widespread public discussion of the need to upgrade schools and teachers, relatively trivial amounts of funding are available, with most support permitting half-day or one-day workshops. The level of funding needed nationwide would be in the billions of dollars. No sources of funding at this level appear on the horizon.

There is a need to develop projects that involve a long-term relationship between a particular school or a school district and some faculty or staff group on campus. For example, we are seeking an association with one or more schools that wish to move to an organized program of helping their students "learn how to learn". The extent of curricular reorganization and rethinking of instruction that would be required to effect such a program would entail cooperative activities over a period of several years.

Another aspect of our work that needs to be resolved is to locate the program within the administrative structure of the University in such a way

that it retains its identity but becomes part of the budgetary structure of the University. This is not an easy problem to solve at Cornell University or at most universities. The essential element is that the Committee continues to be recognized as a University-wide effort in which all members of the University Committee have a stake and will continue to participate. It is also necessary that some aspects of the Committee's program plan find their way into the regular budgetary process of the University if the effort is to be sustained. We were reminded in early meetings with the community that a similar effort was launched in the 1950s and was continued for a number of years until energies of the leaders ran out. The programs required for sustaining University-school cooperative efforts are consuming of time, energy and money. No easy solutions to administrative organization for such efforts are likely to be found.

At this point in the history of our program we remain optimistic regarding the future. There seems to be a continuously increasing trust and cooperativeness between the University and the community and a gradual improvement in the tone and quality of programs sponsored. We have every reason to believe that this program will continue for the indefinite future.